

THE ACTIVE SOCIAL LIFE OF
“MUSLIM WOMEN’S RIGHTS”:
A PLEA FOR ETHNOGRAPHY, NOT POLEMIC,
WITH CASES FROM EGYPT AND PALESTINE

LILA ABU-LUGHOD



ABSTRACT

Rather than arguing about whether “Muslim women” do or do not have rights, I suggest that we begin from the premise that the concept of, and the practices around, “Muslim women’s rights” have an active social life today that can and should be studied ethnographically. The kinds of questions that guide us then become: In what debates and institutions do “Muslim women’s rights” partake? How are they mediated? What work do the notion and the practices organized in its terms do in various places, for various kinds of women? What infrastructures support them? As an anthropologist, I examine just a few of the many sites where “Muslim women’s rights” are differentially in play: in Egyptian and Palestinian women’s NGOs as well as in rural villages where ordinary women and girls live their lives at the intersection of national media and local institutions.

“Muslim women’s rights”—something to fight for, debate, consider historically, see cross-culturally, make happen, organize around, fund, and examine in action (as expressed or as violated)—have an extraordinarily active social life in our contemporary world. There is no one in the US or Europe who does not know something or have an opinion about “Muslim women’s rights,” and there are not many parts of the Muslim world where “rights” are not also in play. As this concept of “Muslim women’s rights” circulates across continents, traveling in and out of classrooms and government policy offices; UN forums in New

York and Geneva and local women's organizations in Egypt, Malaysia, and Palestine; television soap operas and mosque study groups; model marriage contracts developed in North Africa and popular memoirs sold in airport bookstores and instantly recognizable by the veiled women stamped on their covers, we are confronted with the question of how to make sense of its travels and its translations across forms and forums, from websites to shelters for battered women to inheritance disputes in rural villages.¹

What would happen if we reframed the usual questions and instead tracked "Muslim women's rights" into the multiple social worlds in which they operate, paying particular attention to their mediations and transformations? What if we did not assume the ontological status of women's rights or ask referential questions such as whether Muslim women do or do not have (enough) rights, do or do not want rights, gain or lose rights through Islamic or secular law, need feminists or others to deliver them their rights, or even, as the more sophisticated theorists of liberal "rights talk" might lead us to ask, whether it might be bad to argue for Muslim women's rights since, paradoxically, rights are both enabling and limiting in that they arise from, but then fix and perpetuate, injured identities (Brown 1995)? And what if we did not make moral arguments, as we might if we drew analogies with legal critiques of other forms of rights regimes, trying to judge whether women's rights efforts might be "doing more harm than good," as Kennedy (2002) put it?

I would suggest, as an anthropologist, that we might learn a great deal if we stepped back from the usual terms of debate and instead followed "Muslim women's rights" as they travel through various worlds and projects, circulate through debates and documents, organize women's activism, and mediate women's lives in various places. The questions then become: In what debates and institutions do "Muslim women's rights" partake? What work do the practices organized in its terms do in various places, for various women? How, in fact, do "Muslim women's rights" produce our contemporary world?

I use the term "social life" here to suggest that Muslim women's rights are to be found only in their social play. By this, however, I mean not just the social circulation of the concept, as Appadurai (1986) might have taught us, or the social contexts of its reproduction, transplantation, or vernacularization, as Merry (2006) has usefully shown us for women's

human rights more generally, but its differential mediation through various social networks and technical instruments, as Latour (1999) and the ethnographers of science might recommend.² To make my argument, I will take you to a few of the many sites where Muslim women's rights operate, to look at the social forms through which, in these sites, the term moves. Geographically, I will go to Egypt and Palestine.³

EGYPT: IN SHIFTING FIELDS

Egypt is a good place to examine the social life of "women's rights." It is well studied by feminist scholars, has a rich history of women's activism, and is the country in which I have done ethnographic research for years. "Women's rights" (not framed, for the most part—for good political reasons, given the history of nationalism and the mixed Coptic and Muslim population—as "Muslim" women's rights) have had a long and busy social life there, being explicitly advocated for with the formation of the Egyptian Feminist Union in the 1920s, but having been the subject of concern earlier in the mode of colonial feminism (Ahmed 1992) and turn-of-the-century nationalist-modernism, such as that of Qasim Amin who wrote *The Liberation of Women*, a book read well beyond Egypt (Badran 1995; Abu-Lughod 1998; Najmabadi 1998; Booth 2001; Elsadda 2001; Baron 2005).

After the critical period of state feminism under Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 60s, when independent women's organizations were shut down but sweeping legislation was put in place guaranteeing education, jobs, labor rights, maternity leaves, and various forms of state welfare, a new phase began under President Sadat (Hatem 1992; 2006; Nelson 1996; Elsadda 2001). Neoliberal economic reform and the opening to the US starting in the 1970s led to the rollback of important protective legislation and paved the way for various civil society organizations from the Islamists to women activists, many working through the paradigm and projects of "development" to play a more active part in society, not to mention picking up some of the pieces of social welfare now abandoned by the privatizing state under structural adjustment (Abdelrahman 2004, 51; 2007). A wave of new women's NGOs were formed in the 1980s and 90s, enhanced by the full reentry of international NGOs such as the Ford Foundation, the Population Council, and

UNICEF, and massive aid from European governments and the US as part of the “peace” dividend. The traffic in women’s rights was intensified with Egypt’s participation in international conferences in the mid-1990s, most notably hosting the International Conference on Population and Development and sending delegates to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (al-Ali 2000; ‘Abd al-Salam 2005).

Significant international funds have insured that women’s rights and service NGOs have become a growth industry. A survey by the Social Research Center at the American University in Cairo of over 100 projects to “empower women” and increase their “participation in the economic life” since 1980, with the majority in the last decade, lists about 70 funding sources.⁴ There are currently tens of thousands of NGOs operating in Egypt, despite dire restrictions on civil society organizations and periodic government crackdowns (Abdelrahman 2004). As one experienced donor noted, “Out of the 20,000 or 24,000, you have 3,000 who you can describe as active and have made strides forward” (Naela Rifaat, personal communication). Some NGOs that work on women’s issues are among those that are highly active and respected.⁵

When I turned my attention to women’s NGOs in 2007–08, I found some important developments that reflect the transformation of the political and economic terrain in Egypt and confirm how critical the dynamics of transnational political organizing and economic exchange, local class relations, and national historical shifts are for the social life of “women’s rights.” Al-Ali’s study of women activists in the 1990s noted the link between women’s organizations and the wider context, suggesting that their debates and conflicts were “a mirror of Egyptian political culture” (al-Ali 2000, 201), similar to the “contestations of identity and authenticity” found in many other postcolonial societies (185). Debates about foreign funding were fierce, linked to “the struggles for political independence and especially the rejection of increasing American influence” (201), even though, as Abdelrahman (2004, 182–3) shows in her later study based on a survey of 60 Egyptian NGOs, foreign funding is highly sought after even while complaints abound about the way this funding constrains the choice of projects and forces local organizations “to tailor their objectives to suit the priorities of these agencies.”

Yet I would argue that the larger political-economic contexts have affected “women’s rights” most forcefully by determining the channels

through which they operate and the technologies that mediate them. Arguably, the three most significant shifts in the social life of rights in Egypt in the last decade have been (1) their governmentalization, (2) their imbrication with Islamic institutions and religious discourse, and (3) their commercialization or association with the corporate world. Since al-Ali did her research in Cairo in the 1990s, not only have government organizations like the National Council for Women or capitalist-style international NGOs come to mediate “women’s rights” differently, but the politics, projects, and self-presentations of groups working for women’s rights have shifted both to reflect the transnational appeal of human rights and to respond to the local situation in which religiosity has gained tremendous legitimacy. This is all independent of whether Egyptian women have gained or lost rights, which I am insisting is the wrong kind of question to ask.

The Governmentalization of Rights

The governmentalization of “women’s rights” can best be seen in the establishment in 2000 of the National Council for Women (NCW) by presidential decree. As Sakr notes, “under the auspices of Suzanne Mubarak, wife of the Egyptian president, the Council was set up to advise the presidency and the government on the effect of public policies on women” (2004, 166). Some of the leaders of the NCW, like the leaders of its predecessor, the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (set up by Suzanne Mubarak in 1988), are respected individuals, even though they work with governmental organs. Yet Sakr, who studied the situation just a few years after the NCW’s formation, reports the initial suspicions of many in the NGO world. Relying in part on the reporting of Mariz Tadros, she argues,

The Council also served another less obvious purpose. It provided a vehicle for co-opting women who hitherto had channeled their efforts into NGOs.... One dismissed it as a “propaganda machine” that would be deployed to legitimize policies already drawn up, leaving NGOs to carry the real burden of defending women’s rights. Others regarded it as a “means for usurping” NGO activities in the field. (Sakr 2004, 167)

It is clear from the dissenting shadow report of the Egyptian NGOs CEDAW Coalition (Marei, Fayed, and Abdel-Hadi 2008) that there is

concern that NCW, as a government organ, covers up problems. And it would be worth studying who applies for and gets the grants that NCW offers, since one source told me that the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, its sister organization, directs its funds to five or ten favorite NGOs, most of which were established by its board members.

Rather than judging the National Council for Women, I am interested in examining the role it has been playing in “women’s rights” in Egypt. According to my interviews in 2008, NCW has had a mixed role. It has tried to be inclusive, inviting the participation of many women previously active in women’s issues in Egypt, though not as representatives of their organizations but as individuals (thus weakening the NGOs). The NCW has also been the recipient of significant funding from the Egyptian government, the United Nations Development Program, and foreign sources including USAID that many of the smaller, more radical feminist NGOs will not accept. The significant number of projects conducted under NCW auspices suggests that it is now an institution through which “women’s rights” get both visibility and practical existence.

NCW is a channel for funds that are then distributed along particular social and political lines.⁶ For example, the report on the United Nations Development Assistance Framework for Egypt 2007–2011 (which closely follows the outlines of the earlier Arab Human Development Reports)⁷ specifies the partnerships that are to be established between the UN and various ministries and governmental and civil society bodies to implement development goals. One of the six goals of assistance to the state is to assure that “women’s participation in the workforce, political sphere and in public life is increased and all their human rights are increasingly fulfilled” (UN/E 2006). The National Council for Women and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood are prominent among those named as partners for improving women’s status and rights. The funds for “women’s rights” that the NCW can make use of are thus not negligible: the estimated cost to the UN system for the whole project is \$340 million over the five years, which does not include the amount to be contributed by the World Bank (UN/E 2006, 22).⁸ In taking a lion’s share of development assistance, the NCW can determine many of the projects and people active in “women’s rights.”⁹

State organizations’ involvement in defining and producing wom-

en's rights is not the only change we can observe in the social field of "Muslim women's rights" in Egypt. There has been a decided shift in the kinds of projects and languages that define work on behalf of women in Egypt due to the strong internationalization of "women's rights" in the NGO world. In a sense, the NGOs themselves are also part of what Halley et al. (2006) call "governance feminism," in which elites speak for women and use their gender expertise. One sign of the enmeshment in transnational feminist governance is the emerging hegemony of human rights language in women's rights advocacy. A study of women's rights in Egypt published in 1999 by the Population Council is full of the language of legal rights and of development; in the section on NGOs there is only one mention of "human rights" and that is in connection with the projects of the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women, an NGO founded in the 1980s to help women heads of household among the garbage-sorting community of Muqattam and Manshiet Nasr (Guenena and Wassef 1999). In contrast, the very first sentence of the Canadian Ambassador's introduction to the orientation materials for the Gender Equality program launched by the Canadian International Development Agency in 2004 is "Gender Equality is a basic human right" (CIDA 2004). A major section of this document is titled "Gender Equality and the Realization of Basic Human Rights." It consists of a description of the "rights-based approach to poverty reduction and development" (24). The CIDA document quotes liberally from CEDAW and human rights documents—sources barely mentioned in the 1990s. This is important because CIDA has been a key funder of women's NGOs and projects for women's empowerment, including the community schools project for girls in Upper Egypt (Zaalouk 2004).

International support for women's rights organizations has merged the interests of educated professional women in Egypt with an international (hyper)concern about Middle Eastern and Muslim women's rights, leading to the proliferation of organizations and projects. This is well illustrated by the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women (ADEW), the organization founded in 1987 to provide micro-credit to women heads of household. On its website, ADEW claims now to have "emerged as both an influential grassroots organization and a leading advocate for women's rights."¹⁰ One of its co-founders, Heba el-Kholy, who went on to do a Ph.D. in anthropology, describes

the origins of the organization in her early experience in development. Working with the garbage collectors and sorters in Muqattam, she discovered a large number of women-headed households, something that the government and Egyptian society with their idealized image of the family denied existed. She decided that this population was particularly disadvantaged in access to credit; such women, usually illiterate, were also disadvantaged by not having their own personal identity cards that would entitle them to government subsidies, pensions, and services. So in its early years, ADEW worked on these economic issues that affected the poor, considering irrelevant the subjects of the greatest activity among women's organizations in the 1990s, i.e., issues of women's political participation (el-Kholy 2002, 4–6).

ADEW now boasts literacy programs, health services, and legal awareness seminars, operating from fifteen offices in five different areas with a staff of 200. ADEW's list of donors is equally striking: it includes one Egyptian (Sawiris Foundation for Development) and one Arab (Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organization [AG Fund]), with the rest being a who's who of foreign or UN foundations or agencies: the European Commission Delegation of the European Commission to Egypt, Swiss Development Fund, Ford Foundation, Embassy of Japan, Royal Netherlands Embassy, Dutch Organization for International Development Cooperation (Novib), German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), Italian Debt Swap Program, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Australian Embassy, and Embassy of Finland. In 2008–09 ADEW expanded its activities to women and domestic violence (in line with a worldwide trend, and one focus of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework cited above), opening a shelter and beginning an awareness campaign. Surprisingly keyed into the international community, ADEW's networks even extended to partners at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs in 2008–09.¹¹

Like everywhere in the global South, the world of women's rights activity in Egypt is highly social and interpersonal. Al-Ali observed intra- and inter-group rivalries and tensions in the 1990s. Now, ten years later, Egyptian feminist activists vacillate between respect and suspicion or jealousy when they talk about their colleagues. One of several recommendations 'Abd al-Salam (2005, 299–309) made on the basis of her

study of ten (unnamed) small women's NGOs—whose weaknesses were a lack of democratic structure or transparency within the organizations; the amassing of power in the hands of overextended directors; elitism; and the marginalization of staff—was that more cooperation and coordination should exist among the NGOs, instead of the current sense of competition.¹² In this, Egyptian organizations are not much different from similar entities elsewhere. Critiques of the NGO world, such as the Sangtin Collective's (2006) critique of India or Shehabuddin's (2008) of Bangladesh, point to perennial problems with internal hierarchies, concentration of power among the middle- and upper-class/caste leaders, and jealousy about funding. Moreover, the same charges of professionalization, NGOization of women's struggles, time taken up with report writing and fundraising that favor elites, and the turn to routinized gender training instead of political struggle that have been made, as discussed below, about NGOs in Palestine (Jad 2005) apply in Egypt.

Imbrication with Islamic Institutions and Religious Discourse

A new accommodation with religious institutions and ideology is the second characteristic of the social life of women's rights in Egypt. Although most of those involved in the official world of women's rights work think that women's rights are under threat by rising conservative Islamist elements, there are various ways to respond, especially in a world of close social ties. On the one hand, one activist I spoke with complained about a director of an important NGO whom she acknowledged to be doing excellent work. She had undergone "a complete transformation" from her beginnings in the 1980s when she was "a veiled, very modest person" and "mainstream." Her skirts had gotten shorter, her veil had come off, and she wore high-heeled shoes on her visits to provincial cities, something considered inappropriate. On the other hand, such activists were suspicious of those new actors in the gender field who "played the indigenous card." The director of another NGO who had "made much out of her connections with the donors and the state" to gain "visibility" was faulted for presenting herself as "the real, the essential Egyptian woman.... 'I am the good woman with head covered. I'm not one of those lunatic feminists with a Western agenda.'" ¹³ Interestingly, this woman was seen as mainstream, endorsing whatever the National Council for Women did and taking on only legal issues

(unlike other more radical NGOs, such as the New Woman Center or Nadim, that criticize the state and raise issues of economic and political justice, including prison torture).

The more explicit engagement with Islam can be seen clearly in the NGO world as well as in governmental organizations. In March 2008, I went to the headquarters of a highly respected NGO that supports women's rights. Called the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA), it was founded in 1995 and is located in a poor and crowded informal neighborhood in Cairo. It had been set up there to help just this sort of population; now that it has so much more funding, it still refuses to leave the area because of its commitment to serving the community. CEWLA gains legitimacy by being there. You walk past vegetable vendors, bicycles, and cars along a dusty street full of construction rubble and go up the stairs of an unmarked building to the second floor. There, in its new headquarters in a warren of rooms with basic institutional furnishing, is the Center.

This is an organization that started small, with just a couple of rooms and file boxes for furniture. It is headed by a lawyer, Azza Suleiman, who co-founded it with three other lawyers. Many of the staff are women lawyers, graduates of the Egyptian universities where women, as in most institutions of higher education in the Arab world, constitute more than half of the students. Given financial support almost immediately by such organizations as the Canadian International Development Agency and Dutch Oxfam, and later by many others including the Now or Never Fund of the Global Fund for Women, the Ford Foundation, the Sawiris Foundation, and so forth,¹⁴ CEWLA has expanded its mission: from giving legal aid to women, the organization has moved to raising awareness about violence and children's rights, lobbying at the national level, conducting studies and publishing research, and providing direct services including adult literacy education, democracy training for children, and sexual and reproductive health education for teenagers. In CEWLA publicity material, the organization describes itself as dealing with topics from "a rights-based perspective," although in some of their other literature they claim to combine development and human rights perspectives. In their self-representation to Dutch Oxfam (Oxfam Novib), for example, they describe themselves as providing "training to lawyers and leaders of NGOs with the aim of increasing their knowledge and skills in relation to women's rights."¹⁵

Seham Ali, the articulate and lively lawyer who met with me to talk about CEWLA in the absence of the director, was enthusiastic and professional. Fourteen years out of law school, she had only recently joined the organization after practicing as a lawyer. She invoked CEDAW (the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination Against Women) as their guiding principle,¹⁶ though she admitted that not all those they worked with needed to know that. In other words, they use an internationally recognizable rights-based language, though their goals range from national policy and legal reform to legal aid for individual women, sex education for youth, and literacy and computer classes.

CEWLA's latest initiative is taking the organization in a relatively new direction and represents an historically significant shift in the social lives and institutional mediations of "Muslim women's rights." The particular dynamics are Egyptian but, as I argue elsewhere, what CEWLA has been funded to do reflects a global trend that is taking a particularly novel form in the transnational social networking of cosmopolitan Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2009a). The trend is toward highlighting the identities of women as Muslim, even though the NGOs are not faith-based or linked to any religious organizations. As Bibars (2001) and Abdelrahman (2004) have noted, there are Coptic and Muslim NGOs that have long provided services to women in Egypt; Bibars (2001, 116) is critical of them for their rigid expectations about gender roles and, in the case of Muslim welfare groups, their bias toward women who are heavily veiled and who present themselves as "lonely, sick and poor."

The project that CEWLA was about to launch in 2008 was dedicated to demonstrating the compatibility of CEDAW and *shari'a*, usually glossed as Islamic law. That this project is being taken up is an index of CEWLA's responsiveness both to the larger cultural-political context and the problems and concerns brought to them by the ordinary poor women, men, and youths they serve and in whose midst they have located their organization. Seham Ali explained to me that people in Egypt are suspicious of anything that comes from the West. Some have accused CEDAW of seeking to destroy the family and undermine religion. This new project was intended to counter that ignorance. CEWLA had now routed itself through new institutional networks, enlisting experts in Islamic law, and particularly Dr. Amna Musir, a respected and "non-

controversial” professor of Islamic philosophy at al-Azhar University who had shown that 95% of CEDAW fits with shari‘a. Where there are points of difference, Ms. Ali added, there are often equivalents. She gave the example of adoption (which is not permitted in Islam). “We have something in Islam that resembles it called the duty to protect orphans (*kafala al-yatim*). We shouldn’t accept anything that goes against shari‘a but....” CEWLA’s approach, she insisted, was simply to open up the subject for discussion: “Let’s see if CEDAW is contrary to Islam.” They would be running seminars and conferences, talking with media, judges, lawyers, and religious authorities. They were especially keen on running training sessions in the university law faculties to reach the future lawyers of Egypt (Ali 2008).¹⁷

That the concern with religion also comes from their “grassroots” base was clear from a point Ali made later in our conversation. Talking about the literacy classes CEWLA offers, she noted that they want to teach those who attend more than just reading and writing—legal literacy and knowledge about health were also important. She then mentioned that they also teach about religion. Flustered when I stopped her to ask why, she said, “No, not to teach them how to pray or do ablutions or anything like that. But sometimes they ask about whether something is religiously right or wrong (*halal* or *haram*). From the legal point of view and from shari‘a.” She said she had studied a little shari‘a in law school; if she knew the answer she would respond. If not, she would tell them, “I’ll try to get someone to talk to you about this.”

CEWLA is not the only NGO to deal with al-Azhar these days. In the UN Development Assistance Framework for Egypt 2007–2011 discussed above, al-Azhar is mentioned as a partner of the National Council for Women and several ministries (including that of Religious Endowments) in the pursuit of two goals: changing perceptions of women’s rights and combatting gender violence (UN/E 2006, 30).¹⁸ The UN framework dedicated five and a half million dollars to these two desired outcomes. The tracks of women’s rights now run through al-Azhar, with consequences that are sure to shape their form and function. Twenty-five years ago, no one would have predicted that Muslim women’s rights would be traveling so regularly in and out of Islamic law, Islamist parties, and the discourses and practices of moderation and reform within religious bounds (Mahmood 2006).

The Commercialization of Rights

The smart and dedicated professional women in the Egyptian elite who work on women's empowerment and rights seem to cycle in and out of and circulate among organizations, sometimes hired by UNICEF, sometimes founding their own NGOs, sometimes conducting research for government councils. The opportunities change with time and circumstances and so too do the "rights" they advocate. In one of the most dramatic shifts of the recent decade, and symptomatic of a global shift toward a neoliberal model for civil society, Iman Bibars, the feminist co-founder of ADEW who ran for Parliament in 2007, holds a Ph.D. in development studies from the UK, and wrote a book criticizing those who mistake poor urban Egyptian women's coping strategies for a form of resistance, recently became the coordinator of the Middle East/North Africa program of Ashoka, which describes itself as the global association of the world's leading social entrepreneurs.¹⁹

In a television interview, Bibars explained Ashoka's mission as looking for individuals who are "innovators" and "unique," who "think outside the box." She likened them to business pioneers, but for what Ashoka calls "the citizen sector." "We are the venture capitalists of the social sector," Bibars explained, in part because Ashoka accepts no government funding, looking for partnerships between corporations and foundations.²⁰ The business language of Ashoka's creed is on its website:

We believe that the growth of a global citizen sector begins with the work of individual social entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs drive the sector forward, responding to new challenges and changing needs. They are rooted in local communities but think and act globally. They are the ultimate role models and the pillars of Ashoka's vision of Everyone a Changemaker™.²¹

"Citizen sector" is their name, they explain, for what Americans call non-profits and the rest of the world calls NGOs.²²

The way women's rights talk in Egypt is also beginning to operate in a global commercial world—this third path in the evolving social life of "Muslim women's rights"—can be seen most clearly in the latest project of another NGO called the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights

(ECWR), founded in 1996, only a year after CEWLA. Chaired by Nehad Abu el-Komsan, this organization has been extremely successful in taking on a range of projects and issues beyond its initial concerns with legal aid. Its mission is described in the very contemporary language of liberalism: "CWR's work is based on the belief that women's rights are an integral part of human rights and are key to any substantive progress towards building a democratic culture and development in Egypt and the Middle East region."²³

ECWR is one of the few NGOs to be featured on the National Council for Women's official website. Unafraid to declare women's rights as human rights, in line with the contemporary popularity of this language, ECWR also makes the novel appeal to socially responsible corporate sponsorship. This is, perhaps, the homegrown equivalent to the transnational NGO Ashoka ("venture capitalists of the social sector"). One of ECWR's latest campaigns is against sexual harassment on the streets. ECWR appropriated the slogan, "The Street Is Ours," from a more radical coalition formed in the summer of 2005 after the scandalous attack on women protesters by thugs with police approval/instigation at a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration by the political movement Kefaya (Enough) (al-Mahdi n.d.). Delinked from the ugly politics of government repression and violence by the security forces of which the incident of sexual harassment had actually been a part, ECWR's campaign focuses on anonymous harassment of women on the streets, which their survey revealed to be widespread. As "the only project in Egypt taking on the issue of sexual harassment of women in the streets," as their publicity material states, "our efforts have already gained unprecedented support from the public and the media," although it drew criticism from the First Lady for tarnishing Egypt's image.

Most intriguing are the innovative technologies ECWR mobilized for this campaign: one attempt to raise money consisted in a proposal to develop a system for mapping harassment through SMS messages. The proposal was submitted for the 2008 USAID Development 2.0 Challenge through NetSquared; the winner was to be determined by a jury after a popular vote narrowed the contestants down to fifteen finalists, à la Star Academy and American Idol.²⁴ On the ECWR website, besides noting the enthusiasm of young women volunteers for the project, they thank their "corporate volunteers"—Nile and Nugoom FM, Masrawy.com, Filbalad.

com, Egyptsoft.org, Goethe Institute, and Netsmart Egypt—for having “given a life and professionalism to the campaign that was unmatched in NGO work in Egypt.” The bid for mobile phone technology development, corporate cooperation, and popular voting fits perfectly in today’s Cairo where shopping malls, satellite television, ads for vying cell phone companies, and consumerism dominate the landscape (Abaza 2006).

This campaign marks another implantation in Egypt of the transnational trend to focus on violence against women, supported through various UN organizations, particularly UNIFEM and the CEDAW Commission. In Egypt, ADEW’s new women’s shelter is another node in the production of women’s rights through this medium. Sally Engle Merry (2006) has shown that the campaign against gender violence has been, since the 1990s, perhaps the main issue on the agenda of the transnational feminist community. There are those who have criticized this focus, noting how it universalizes and thus hides the divisions between feminists of the North and South; how it exaggerates women’s identities as victims only; and how it erases local specificities or distinctions among forms of violence (Kapur 2002; Grewal 2005). But the most interesting phenomenon to observe is how many are building careers and profits on this issue that circulates beyond the halls of the UN and CEDAW hearings. To take just a few examples, there are Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* performed in Cairo as well as the US and Beijing; the One in Three Women global campaign to raise awareness about violence against women that encourages you to buy their cards, charms, and dog tags;²⁵ and Peacekeeper Cause-metics that asks you to support women’s causes by purchasing their lipstick and nail polish.²⁶ Although its focus has always been women’s health, only a few years ago Peacekeeper Cause-metics also gave a fraction of its proceeds to fight “honor crimes” and other forms of cultural violence against women associated with the Muslim world.

PALESTINE: OTHER VIOLENCES AND INESCAPABLE POLITICS

This takes us to the next case and space of rights work: Palestine. One of the most recent “global” projects orchestrated in the name of “Muslim women’s rights” is the Global Campaign to Stop Stoning and Killing Women! Launched in 2007, it quickly changed its name to the Global

Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women! (note the shift in emphasis).²⁷ It is coordinated by the network Women Living Under Muslim Law (WLUML), founded on a shoestring in 1984 by a small group led by the anti-fundamentalist Algerian feminist Marieme Hélie-Lucas, which has grown to be a major international player in defending Muslim women's rights.²⁸ Described by one legal scholar (Sunder 2003) as part of the New Enlightenment, WLUML produces alerts, research, conferences, and publications, all of which are cast in terms of endangered or abused Muslim women. In its press announcement, the new campaign justifies itself by the alleged need "to address the intensifying trend of cultural and religious legitimisation of lethal violence against women" (WLUML 2007, 2). The campaign isolates, targets, and publicizes culturally specific forms of violence against women: violations of Muslim women's rights by Muslim regimes, Muslim fundamentalists, and local (Muslim) families. Individual cases of stoning or threatened stoning, whipping, and "honor crimes" merge together on the campaign website as if they were instances of the same phenomenon, despite the differences among individual cases, countries of origin, reliability of information, and the legitimacy of the practices for Muslim thinkers, state legal systems, and ordinary people.

Violence against women is a serious problem worldwide. But to begin to see what is specific and perhaps peculiar about its deployment as an instance of the violation of "Muslim women's rights," we need to consider the context in which the campaign is being mounted. Two aspects of context are critical. First is the dense terrain of similar sensationalizing projects to save Muslim women from their cultures, whether imagined as the backward rural communities that well-educated urban youth (who are not averse to using American resources and see themselves as part of a transnational progressive youth movement) target in web campaigns like the Jordanian "No Honor in Honor Crimes," or represented as Islamic law, as in the right-wing American campaign called "Islamofascist Awareness Week" that was bolstered by crude pamphlets on the way Islam oppresses women (Spencer and Chesler 2007). These projects, different as they are, share a family resemblance to the productions of a Somali immigrant Dutch nationalist party darling who linked up with a racist filmmaker to make a film that contains sensual footage of half-naked, bruised women with voiceovers of Qur'anic verses, and

the works of a favorite immigrant on the US lecture circuit who pens books with titles like *The Trouble with Islam Today* (Manji 2005).²⁹

The second context, much in the news as I was first working on this article in the early days of 2009, is that of violence against (Muslim) women inflicted in war and by militaries, not just in Afghanistan and Iraq, but in Palestine, as in the Israeli attack on Gaza that was launched in December 2008. In 23 days, over 1300 Palestinians were killed, buried alive in houses bombed by F-16s, shot at close range in their beds, machine-gunned from the sea, shelled by tanks using flechettes, and burned by white phosphorus, which acts like napalm (AI 2009; Hider 2009). How many were women? We know that over 300 of the dead were children. Human rights groups say 900 were civilians. No one gives a separate count for women but cases of women killed or wounded are described in all the reports.

Where is the global feminist campaign against killing such significant numbers of (mostly Muslim) women? Or maiming them, traumatizing them, killing their children, sisters, mothers, husbands, fathers, and brothers? Code Pink may be the only US-based women's group that has focused on Gaza, fundraising for women and children, lobbying, producing a news digest, and organizing trips there to witness and bring help to women.³⁰ Women in conflict zones suffer and are killed in great numbers when armies, such as the Israeli in this case, are not concerned about avoiding civilian casualties.³¹

Palestinian feminists have had to negotiate this situation for years, balancing their commitment to women's rights, as well as contact with feminists from other countries and regions as necessary for political and funding purposes, with an awareness of the larger political context within which they and the women for whom they advocate live and work. Despite widespread self-criticism about the depoliticizing effects of the NGOization of the Palestinian women's movement that has brought on professionalization, hierarchization of expertise, diversion of energies to funders' desires for gender training and research reports, and deflection of women from political mobilization to grant writing, the national commitments and constant attention to the larger political situation remain apparent in everything these women's rights advocates do (Carapico 2000; Hanafi and Tabar 2005; Jad 2005; 2008; Johnson 2008). Palestinian NGOs and projects, whether in the Occupied Territories or within

the 1948 borders, may be funded by the Scandinavians, the Germans, the Ford Foundation, the Open Society, WHO, and UNIFEM, just like so many of the Egyptian NGOs, but at the core of their efforts are the inescapable realities of occupation and militarization, and in the case of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, marginalization and discrimination.

One of the most moving studies I have encountered from this region is the report on some "action-research" on women and loss conducted during the second intifada. This report illustrates several features of women's rights work in Palestine that make it different, perhaps from Egypt. The study was designed to help produce effective psychological and social therapies for women while at the same time giving voice to women's experiences of political conflict. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian argues in her chapter of *Women, Armed Conflict and Loss: The Mental Health of Palestinian Women in the Occupied Territories*, the project was to stand "at the crossroads between human rights violations, mental health and research" (2004a, 5).³² The mixed goals were "identifying, analyzing and examining Palestinian women's reaction following the latest Israeli invasions of Jenin, Nablus, and Bethlehem, and the war-related crimes," "healing some of the shared wounds with groups of Palestinian women survivors of such crimes," "constructing and applying new therapeutic/intervention strategies," and "documenting and disseminating Palestinian women's war crimes' narratives according to their own words" (7). The long quotations from individual women in the focus and support groups unfold wrenching stories of trauma and coping in response to political violence (like watching your son's brain spill on the ground as Israeli soldiers trample his body), house raids and demolition (watching your house blown up when you've hidden your sons in the well at the center of the house), terror and sexual harassment (soldiers molesting young women), gender-related violence (surveillance of martyrs' wives, births at checkpoints, unemployed and frustrated husbands at home), and continuous fear and insecurity (17–31).

The researchers from the Women's Studies Centre in Jerusalem identify strongly with the women whose rights concern them. Despite the differences in educational levels between the NGO feminists in general and the "grassroots," they are bound by a national sensibility and solidarity that is never foregrounded in the Egyptian situation. The most searing chapter of *Women, Armed Conflict and Loss* is called "A

Glimpse into the Women's Stories." It describes how the project came into being when Sama Aweidah and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian went to Jenin refugee camp in April 2002 just after the Israeli army had savaged it. They accompanied a delegation of foreign therapists invited through the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees. Aweidah describes children telling the delegation, "We have seen corpses filling the streets of the camp." "Yes, we saw the bodies. They were many. We know some of them." "I saw As'ad's leg. They took it to the hospital." She describes a silent woman sitting on a pile of rubble, guarding what was left of her former house. She describes Shalhoub-Kevorkian's encounter with a new bride who showed her, in her ruined house, "the remnants of the furniture and her new clothes, including her nightgown, which the soldiers had piled together and urinated on." Her groom had been taken away. Aweidah describes the quiet eleven-year-old girl with sad eyes who walks with them, as if looking for security (Aweidah 2004, 103-5). Then come the stories from Bethlehem after the 40-day invasion, and from Balata refugee camp, and from Nablus.

The stories are told with compassion and the observation that many of the women cry, both the interview subjects and the researchers. Of one woman Aweidah reports, "something has been torn out of her heart" (131). Arguing for giving women in wartime a voice, Shalhoub-Kevorkian, in another article on this trip to Jenin, tells some gendered stories that are especially unnerving. She introduces a topic that is not usually part of war stories, though it is sometimes noted as a source of humiliation in prison or interrogation literature. One woman talks about how they were imprisoned in their homes when the Israeli army came into the camp. They heard rumors of neighbors being shot. They heard the soldiers break their furniture, their appliances, their doors, their windows. But the woman's most visceral memory was how hard it was for 36 of them to be cooped up together in one room. Her daughter-in-law had recently given birth and was still bleeding heavily because she had had no medical attention; three other women started menstruating. And then she did too. They and their babies in diapers started stinking up the room. Her husband couldn't stand it after a while and made the women and children sit together in one corner. They were filthy, smelly, and embarrassed that their periods were public knowledge, especially the teenager. Remembering the smell of blood and urine, she said, "I

personally knew it is a curse being a woman, but I never imagined how much of a curse" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2004b, 76).

Many committed feminists in Palestine cooperate with international and governmental organizations to work for women's rights or empowerment. Human rights claims, in particular, are recognized as a powerful tool for Palestinians, claims they cannot forfeit even though they know the academic critiques of human rights.³³ Islah Jad, along with other scholars in the Women's Studies Program at Birzeit University (e.g. Rema Hammami, Lisa Taraki, Eileen Kuttab, Rita Giacaman), worked optimistically to shape gender policy for the Palestinian Authority in its early years through producing a series of studies of labor, family, and health (BZU/WSP 1997). Jad also chose to co-author the UNDP's *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*.³⁵ Scholar-activists such as Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian assisted Human Rights Watch in preparing *A Question of Security*, its 2006 report on violence against Palestinian women and girls.

In all this work, they never sidelined the subject of Israeli occupation or violence. For example, in 2005 a group of Palestinian NGOs put together an alternative report about Israel's implementation of CEDAW in the Occupied Palestinian Territories when the CEDAW Commission was reviewing Israel's own self-report (Al-Haq, PCHR, and WCLAC 2005). The alternative report outlined through statistics and first-person sworn testimony answers to the questions that had been posed about Palestinian women by the pre-sessional CEDAW working group concerning the applicability of CEDAW in Israel; the conditions of prisons and the treatment of women prisoners; and the impact of the restriction of movement and the construction of the Wall on access to, and quality of, education and health services. The alternative report held Israel legally accountable, as the occupying power, for implementing UN agreements, even though Israel denied its responsibility. The report found systematic inhumane and discriminatory treatment of Palestinian women in Israeli prison, serious decline in the quality of education and school attendance because of violence and fear of harassment, poverty and malnutrition, lack of access to reproductive health care, and great mental distress.

In other words, with deep concern for women, Palestinian women's NGOs point to the larger structural features that affect Palestinian

women's lives even as they participate in women's rights institutions and networks that are transnational and that are silent on such political features of everyday life. The three NGOs that authored the alternative report were Al-Haq: Law in the Service of Man; the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR); and the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC). The way WCLAC describes itself indicates the way women's NGOs in Palestine connect politics and gender. The organization says it works both on community issues in the treatment of women and on the consequences for women of the Israeli occupation. Founded in 1991 as part of a political party, WCLAC describes itself as acting "not only to reverse historical negligence, the negative cultural legacy and social outlook towards Palestinian women within the community, but also, to address the needs of women victimized by Israel's violent military actions in the Occupied Territories" (WCLAC n.d.). It was due to the intervention of these Palestinian feminists in the Occupied Territories and in Israel, who also raised issues and attended the meetings, that the Concluding Report of the CEDAW Committee, issued on July 22, 2005, noted fourteen areas of concern where Israel was violating the rights of Palestinian women (WG/SPWCI 2005).

However, according to Johnson (2008, 125), those scholar-activists like Shalhoub-Kevorkian who assist international organizations such as Human Rights Watch, are sometimes dismayed to find "that none of their analysis of violence of the occupation and siege and its effects on women and families" gets included in the final reports. In the case of HRW's 2006 report, *A Question of Security*, these local feminists criticized the misuse of statistics and gross generalizations in the report. Johnson charges that it "isolates domestic violence and implicitly gender relations and Palestinian families from all the contexts in which they function." It is disturbing to read her description of the report which, she writes, begins by noting "dozens" of cases of spousal and child abuse, rape, incest, and "murders committed under the guise of family 'honor,'" but mentions nothing about checkpoints, harassment by soldiers, and war. Johnson contrasts this to the research agenda at Birzeit University's Institute for Women's Studies which "steered away from topics [like honor crimes] that we considered had been framed, exoticized and sensationalized by western media and writers" (120). Johnson also contrasts HRW 2006 with a local report on domestic violence by Lamis

Abu Nahleh conducted through the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights. Unlike HRW 2006, Abu-Nahleh's report was based on community research and noted regional patterns, rather than deploying a "culturalist framework" and failing to interrogate "sacred" statistics. Johnson charges that HRW 2006 fails to hold Israel accountable in ways that are crucial; for example, it ignores the effects of occupation and siege on the Palestinian Authority's ability to enforce law and it does not take into consideration the effects of pervasive violence and economic strangulation on Palestinian family relations (125).

These kinds of critiques are different from ones that analyze the way HRW 2006 played in the American media. For example, O'Connor and Roberts' reading of the reception of the report brings us back to the dense terrain noted in my discussion of the Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women—the transnational terrain that any discussion of "Muslim women's rights" traverses. They note an important skewing in reportage: of 80 reports documenting human rights abuses in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict since 2000, only two of the 76 primarily critical of Israel were featured in the *New York Times* (2.6%), while of the four primarily critical of Palestinians, two, including HRW 2006, received coverage (50%). Moreover, HRW 2006 was selectively represented in such a way as to reinforce the impression that Muslim women need saving because they are passive victims of patriarchy and family violence. By failing to quote a single Palestinian women's rights activist (of the 21 mentioned in HRW 2006), the *New York Times* coverage also makes it seem as if only foreigners can identify women's problems and help resolve them, even though Human Rights Watch never implied this (O'Connor and Roberts 2006).

That the HRW report's culturalization of gender violence is not unique is clear from one final story about Palestinian women involved in the "women's rights" industry. In October 2008, Shalhoub-Kevorkian, the feminist scholar and activist discussed above, received the Gruber Foundation's Women's Rights Prize. I was surprised, since the Palestinian issue is so touchy in the US and she is so outspoken. Many recipients of this prize, established a few years ago, have been from the Muslim world. They have all done important women's rights work. But one effect of their commendation is to contribute to the representation of women in the Muslim world as particularly oppressed. Recent recipients include

several women who work for standard liberal ideals: a Turk promoting sexual rights, an Afghan fighting for women's education, and an Iraqi who rails against veiling, the latter two, of course, working in places where women's rights have been excuses for US military violence and occupation. The Gruber Prize selection committee, Shalhoub-Kevorkian surmised, must have received strong nominations of her. Her candidacy was carefully debated, according to a member of the committee with whom I spoke later. When I read the citation, I realized how she might have become legible to the foundation, or at least might be presented palatably to the public, as a standard savior of Muslim women. She is commended for her work "to end domestic violence against Palestinian women, particularly in what have been referred to as honor killings" (Gruber Foundation 2008). Culturalizing violence against women, the trend reflected in the Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women, is critical to today's discourse about the "deficit" of women's rights in Muslim countries. Yet the irony is that Shalhoub-Kevorkian has consistently refused to use the term "crimes of honor," herself referring to the problem descriptively as "femicide" so as *not* to identify it as culturally particular. In her presentations at the prize-giving ceremony and the celebratory dinner, she made audience members uncomfortable by placing domestic violence alongside Israel's systematic military control, violence, and discrimination. In her work more generally, she has preferred to see women as active agents rather than victims, looking at how they fight back, often by trying to protect their families in the face of house demolitions or the fear and insecurity generated by crossing checkpoints and being raided in the middle of the night.³⁶

If governance feminism best characterizes Egyptian women's rights work of the last decade, Jad (2008) has similarly suggested that the establishment of the Palestine National Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, and particularly its patronage of "femocrats" alongside the proliferation since the 1990s of foreign-funded NGOs, has led to the "demobilization of the Palestinian women's movement." Paying careful attention to the types of work, forms of organization, hierarchies, and social networks the new means of pursuing women's rights have entailed, Jad concludes that there has been a gradual disempowerment of women activists. She is most concerned about how this has left the field of "grassroots" women wide open for Islamist mobilization, but I think she underestimates the

distinctive way that the “depoliticized” NGO technologies of gender training courses could still, in the Palestinian national context, intersect with and enhance other sorts of women’s rights work carried out in more activist veins.

A hint of this can be gleaned from the story Aweidah (2004, 102) tells about her first encounter on that trip to the Jenin refugee camp described above. The multinational delegation organized by the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees was greeted by some young men doing medical relief. When these young men found out that there were two “Arabs” accompanying the delegation, they were excited to hear that they came from women’s centers because they had previously had some gender training by the Jerusalem Women’s Studies Centre. They even recognized Aweidah’s name from their training course materials. Such crossovers from gender training to therapeutic and political work characterize the field of women’s rights work in Palestine because of the particular national context. It is precisely such particulars that must be tracked if we want to understand the social life of “Muslim women’s rights” as they operate in a larger international context that silences the particular political claims of Palestinians and deals in generalizations about patriarchal culture, especially Islamic.

HYBRID CIRCUITS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

If the previous two sections analyzed the shifting fields of women’s rights in Egypt and the tight nexus of women’s rights and national politics in Palestine, this final section explores how we might begin to account for the mediations of women’s rights outside of the direct reach of advocates and defenders of women’s rights. For all these professionals, there are women (not themselves) who are imagined as the targets of their efforts. How do Muslim women’s rights circulate in the lives of those often characterized as the “grassroots” beneficiaries?

On the basis of ethnographic work among lower-class urban women in Cairo, the anthropologist Heba el-Kholy (2002) criticized the aborted attempt by a coalition of professional Egyptian women—lawyers, activists, and scholars—to push through a new model marriage contract in the mid-1980s. They had pushed for a marriage contract in the hopes of bypassing the more difficult path of reforming Personal Status Law (reg-

ulating marriage, divorce, and custody). Those involved in developing this model marriage contract in the 1980s, much like the North African coalition that proposed a new contract in 2008, had hoped to “educate” women about their legal rights as Muslims and encourage them to build in stipulations that would not only empower them but ease divorce.³⁷ As Singerman (2005, 172) notes, “The religious justification for the project was clear: throughout Islamic history, from its very beginning, women have included conditions in their marriage contracts that have been widely recognized as legitimate.”

El-Kholy (2002) argues that although women in the community she studied “used the same term for women’s rights, *ha’il mara*, as that used by more upper-class and intellectually inclined feminists, they often attached very different meanings to this term” (128). In her analysis of the “organic” feminism she found in this community, her main example is the *ayma* or marital property contract that she discovered was always signed at the same time as the official marriage contract. El-Kholy only realized its importance when she told women she did not have one. “The mixture of shock, pity, and disbelief” that greeted her question about why the *ayma* was so important was a turning point in her research. One woman was incredulous. “You did not have an *ayma*? How is this possible? Are you living in another world? ... Do you not know your rights as a woman? The *ayma* is the only way to protect a woman from men and from [the passage of] time...” (102). As el-Kholy was to discover, in this poor community the two practices that gave women “bargaining power in their marriage” were the *ayma* and the *trousseau*. The *ayma* itemized all items of furniture and equipment (and their value) belonging to the new home, stipulating them as the sole property of the bride. These might also include the gold engagement jewelry, gifts, and whatever each partner had brought into the marriage. The bride’s family fought hard to inflate the stated value as much as possible but the groom had to sign off, making himself the safekeeper of the goods but guaranteeing that the wife was entitled to reclaim them in the event of a “conflict, of widowhood or divorce” (110). The *ayma* is thus similar to the traditional *mahr* or bridal gift stipulated in marriages in other social classes or parts of the Muslim world.³⁸ The size of both the *ayma* and the *mahr* reflects and then enhances the value of the bride in her marriage. The *ayma*, according to el-Kholy (113), “ups the stakes” of being abandoned or mistreated,

just as the “belated” half of the mahr is considered a deterrent to divorce. What is interesting, however, is that the ayma comes under commercial law, not personal status (religious) law.

El-Kholy's discovery of the importance of the ayma to these women led her to question the way middle- and upper-class feminists in Egypt who campaigned for the model marriage contract (to much resistance) must have been out of touch with the “grassroots.” They never mentioned the ayma as a precedent for demanding and protecting women's rights (120–1).³⁹

Like el-Kholy, I want to turn to communities of women who seem to lie outside the catchment areas and social networks of Egyptian women's rights groups. I do so not to discredit or disparage the professionals and activists who plough the social fields of Muslim women's rights but to give a sense of both the reach and the shapes of discourses of Muslim women's rights far away from the metropolitan centers where they are so vivid, variegated, and well funded. I will take you to one village in Upper Egypt to look at the mediation of women's lives through the social instruments of “rights.”⁴⁰ I invoke some village women's stories to explore the way the circuits of “rights” within such villages intersect with—and diverge from—those we have been following in elite urban and international sites.

In my research in Egypt, I have been trying to track rights in various locales, asking what meanings the term “rights” has and in what fields rights operate. Earlier in this paper I traced some nodes in the international circulation of rights—going in and out of the various women's organizations that promote them, the donor foundations that fund the organizations, and the states that entangle with the rights agenda in two particular countries, Egypt and Palestine. But an anthropologist like me who works in rural communities also wants to ask how “Muslim women's rights” run, if they do, through ordinary women's lives.

For the past eighteen years I have been going back and forth to a village in Upper Egypt that relies on a mixed economy of agriculture, tourism, and migration. I used the village as a base to do research on Egyptian television soap operas and the role they play in shaping a sense of national community and a way of thinking about politics, religion, womanhood, and citizenship. I have written a good deal about this local community (Abu-Lughod 2005). In March 2008, when I was

doing some new research on women's rights organizations and people's everyday thinking about "Muslim women's rights," I went back to some of my women friends to talk about this new project. All had immediate responses to the concept of "women's rights" (*huquq al-mar'a*).

For example, a couple of sisters I'd known since they were young girls (they were now 15 and 22 years old) immediately launched into an animated discussion of a popular television serial that they, along with the rest of the country, had just finished watching during Ramadan. It featured Egypt's biggest star, Yusra. They told me the plot: a few young guys kidnap a female doctor and some nurses on their way home late at night and rape one of them. The show was about bringing these rapists to justice. They wanted me to know that rape is punishable by death.

That they had paid attention to the message of the television serial and were part of a national conversation is significant, but nothing new. Egyptian TV serials often take up important social issues. This serial, *A Matter of Public Opinion* (*Qadiya ra'y 'amm*), had launched public debates on violence against women. After it was broadcast, the serial became the focus of an event in Amman, Jordan that was part of the UNIFEM celebration of the global campaign for Sixteen Days of Activism to End Violence Against Women. Princess Basma of Jordan and Yusra, the star of the serial, appeared together. According to a news report, the princess praised the actress, saying, "I really appreciate your brave stand in tackling the issue of violence against women and placing it on the public agenda." Yusra was reported to have responded, "I believe the series is an important first step to minimise violence against women and it helped sexual-assault victims realise that they can report a case and that authorities will handle it seriously." The news report also noted that Muhssen Jalad, the writer of the series, had taken on the issue after reading statistics about how few rape victims reported the crime to the police. (The same underreporting, of course, is characteristic in the US and elsewhere.) Moreover, the writer said that what he wanted to do was challenge society's misperceptions of rape victims—that they are to blame (Mahmoud 2008). (Again, this parallels the campaigns here in the US.) But these are Egyptian creative personnel working in an industry that has produced soap operas with messages for Egypt and the Arab world for 40 years. The broadcast of *A Matter of Public Opinion* happens to have coincided with the national effort, in line with

the international campaign, to address violence against women. As discussed above, violence against women is a priority listed in the UN Development Assistance Framework for Egypt 2007–2011 and taken up by various NGOs in Cairo.

That national television had mediated women's understandings of "women's rights" in the village was apparent in the response of another young woman. In answer to my question about what she knew about "women's rights," she just said, "It's something Suzanne Mubarak is working on. It's about female circumcision." Indeed, one of the key projects of the National Center for Childhood and Motherhood that addresses violence against girl children is the push for circumcision-free model villages. This young woman, however, knew nothing about such villages.

That all were somehow imbricated in national discourses of rights was clear from a conversation I had with a woman and her teenage daughter whom I had asked if there were any organizations for women's rights or to help women around there. They had no idea. They agreed that perhaps these existed in Cairo, but they didn't know of any in their region. But then we got onto the subject of what happened if a woman was having troubles with her husband. The woman explained that his family and her family would come together to try to sort things out and make peace. When I asked about inheritance, thinking of another conversation (analyzed below), she first said that a woman could go to court. But, she added, it was more likely that people would come to talk to her brother if he was resisting distribution. They would try to persuade him to give his sister her fair share. When I explained to the woman and her daughter that the reason I was working on the topic of women's rights was that some people in the US consider Egyptian women oppressed, the mother laughed. "No, no. They *used* to be," she said. "That was in the past. Now there's progress. All the girls are getting educated now." Her generation had had to help their mothers in the household, she explained. Now, they all wanted their kids educated. Why were she and her husband working so hard? So that their kids could do well in school. He was encouraging his daughter to study French, in the hope it would help her get into college. So although the word "rights" did not come up in this woman's response, she shared the developmentalist discourse of girls' education as the quintessential sign of progress, even a right.

She knew full well that she had to work harder in the house and with the animals because her husband wanted more for his daughters.⁴¹ This equation had been established and publicized by the state in schools and media since the dreams of national development in the 1950s became the stuff of mass consumption.

However, other discussions revealed the multiple mediations and registers of “women’s rights” in this village. ‘Aysha, a woman in her forties from a poor and troubled family whom I had met in a literacy class in the mid-1990s, gave me the best evidence of the hybridity of the concept of “Muslim women’s rights” in this rural village and the multiple institutional circuits through which “rights” are produced and pursued. The literacy classes where I met her were themselves part of the national machinery of women’s rights: sponsored by the government for a couple of years, with local women graduates hired to teach, then for no reason, discontinued.

When I told ‘Aysha that my new project was on women’s rights in Egypt, she exclaimed,

Let me tell you, the woman in Egypt enjoys the highest level of rights. Truly.... Do you know, Lila, that we have women ministers in the cabinet? Ministers! The Minister of Social Affairs. The head of the Finance Ministry. All of them are women. Here in Egypt the government has given women their rights, one hundred per cent.

But then she went on to qualify this:

But people, a woman’s family, they are the ones who undermine her rights. Say it happens that my father leaves me three acres of land. Her brother comes along and says, “No, she shouldn’t take it. The girl shouldn’t take the land.” Here, the government gives her her rights.

Picking up on the shifting pronouns—my father, her brother—I asked if this happened to her. ‘Aysha laughed. “This is just a for instance. Praise be to God [so as not to complain about her fate], my family doesn’t have any land!” Then she continued, “So the brother takes his sister’s land. It happens. In some families. Not all because some families give to the daughters.... He says, ‘I want the land. I’m a man, I should take the land.’” ‘Aysha’s response to this imagined brother was, “But God, Glory be to Him, gives women an inheritance.” She then quoted the Qur’anic

passage that mandates that women inherit.⁴² She concluded, "So if God sent down in the Qur'an word that a woman is entitled, that the woman should get her inheritance, how dare you fight this?"

When I asked what a woman would do in these circumstances, 'Aysha responded, "She goes to the government." Only a few seconds later, she modified this. "Well, first she goes to complain to the family. To the elders." Immediately after that, however, she gave a different example that related to her own village. She reminded me that they had an important religious figure in the next village, a respected man whose father and grandfather had also been religious figures. She said, "We go to him with any problem like this. Women do." Just then, her older brother walked into the room and she confirmed with him, "Isn't it true that a girl goes to the shaykh if she has a problem with her uncle or her brother? Yes, she complains to him. It's normal. And he listens to her." Her brother nodded and then went on to tell a story of a major problem that the shaykh had resolved, interestingly, not between a girl and her family, but between a Christian and some Muslim families in a dispute over land. This showed the shaykh's enormous grace, generosity, and wisdom and suggested why he had the respect of all in mediating arguments.⁴³

In this one conversation, 'Aysha talked about rights in multiple registers: she invoked national legal rights for women; she assessed women's rights in terms of political representation; and she talked about local conflicts within and among families; and then, finally, the God-given rights granted to women in the Qur'an, or what we call shari'a or Islamic law. In another conversation a year later, she defended "Islam" in general. She insisted that Islam says that women are free to work and free to go to school. She then gave examples of important women in the Prophet Muhammad's time: Nafisa who was a teacher, and 'Aysha who transmitted *hadiths*, the sayings of the Prophet. But, she added, some women had decided that freedom meant wearing short dresses with short sleeves and walking around the streets naked. There is too much freedom now, she concluded. Mixing yet again several registers of rights, she explained that this kind of "freedom" was not what Qasim Amin had meant. Here she invoked that classic turn-of-the-century Egyptian modernist reformer who wrote *The Liberation of Women* supporting women's limited education and unveiling. She also referenced in

her discussion the multiple institutions that mediate “rights” in Egypt. These are the forums through which individual women might seek justice: the courts with their lawyers, legalities, and papers; local family arbitration with its pull of emotions, hierarchies, and cross-cutting ties; and the institution of the local religious figure who would intervene in the name of Islamic rights and morality if a woman was wronged by her family. She did not mention NGOs. Like the other women and girls whose conversations about women’s rights I have quoted, ‘Aysha has learned these multiple ways of framing lives and asserting rights from television, from school, from religious study, and from the everyday lives of people in her community, about which community members tend to have intimate knowledge.

In a study of the interaction between a Scandinavian feminist NGO and the village women’s organization it supported on an island off the coast of Tanzania, Christine Walley (n.d.) has argued that a universalizing term like “rights” actually accumulates meanings from multiple sources. She shows that for the Muslim women in the community in which she worked, the KiSwahili term translated as rights (*haki*) could refer to prerogatives and obligations found in Islamic law as well as suggesting what was just in a customary sense. But she also found that *haki* had accumulated other meanings in the independence and socialist periods, meanings tied to citizenship. Most recently, the term was also coming to reference international human and women’s rights frameworks encountered through their leaders who were sent to conferences by funders. When a village woman asserted or claimed her “rights,” therefore, one simply could not know what register she was using, or which meaning(s) of rights she was referencing, or whether in fact these all inflected each other, producing a dense sense of rights.

Walley’s challenging presentation of the way conceptions of rights are layered in one concrete “grassroots” situation is intriguing, and seems to describe well women’s mobilizations of “rights” in Egyptian villages too. What Walley did not pursue is what I have been trying to showcase: the need to do a more sociological tracking of the networks, institutions, and technologies that mediate “Muslim women’s rights.” In the Egyptian village from which I have been drawing my examples, it is clear that even though there are no women’s rights organizations, comments like ‘Aysha’s suggest that the larger national and international en-

terprise of “women’s rights” has shaped local conceptualizations of rights and made certain institutions, such as schools and governmental organs and legal sites, central to their communication and pursuit. However, her comments also reveal how many social institutions and imaginative frameworks outside of the dominant work of NGOs and government are in addition part of local women’s active pursuit of justice and rights. The religious idiom of Islamic law (only now becoming in the capital a track for rights, as we saw in the case of CEWLA) and the local moral force of popular religious authorities, alongside the extended family that remains the most significant social form, exceed the frames and social institutions of more official women’s rights work in Egypt.

CONCLUSION

I have been trying to argue that we need to find new ways of analyzing “Muslim women’s rights,” surely one of the most sensationalized issues on the current global stage, entangled variously with military intervention and transnational feminism, progressive foundations and right-wing think tanks, elite careers and welfare administration, literary commerce and marginal lives. An ethnographic approach that tracks the many social lives that the concept partakes in may be more useful for understanding this subject and the historical moment we are living than moral posturing that traffics in judgments of the work of women’s rights as either a form of collusion with imperialism (to be denounced) or a hopeful sign of universal emancipation and progress (to be celebrated). I argued in the introduction that it might be fruitful to examine how “Muslim women’s rights” makes and remakes the world. How, when, and where is the concept deployed? What transformations of social life and individual lives are produced in its name? Who enables that work and is in turn enabled by it? What new paths of power and channels of capital, financial and cultural, does it open up?

Anthropologists who study rights have urged us to take the “social practice of rights as an object of ethnographic inquiry” (Goodale 2006, 3) and to produce “closely observed studies of rights talk and implementation” (Wilson 2006, 81). I have argued here for something more: that we track carefully, across multiple terrains, the way both practices and talk of rights organize social and political fields, producing organizations,

projects, and forms of governing as much as being produced by them.

If we take this approach, there is no alternative but to go into the details of “Muslim women’s rights” as they move in and out of particular locations and communities. In Cairo, as I showed in the first section, the women’s rights industry creates careers, channels funds, inspires commitments, gives credibility to new actors, creates and disrupts social networks, and legitimizes intellectual and political frameworks and ideals. Women’s rights provide a conduit for foreign intervention and government involvement in ordering the daily lives of both the middle classes and those at the margins. Object of struggle among religious institutions and organizations, women’s rights are also the subject of corporate sponsorship and adopted as a symbol of modernity.

Juxtaposing the Egyptian case to the Palestinian reveals how dependent the operation of “Muslim women’s rights” is on the larger political situation, the organization and resources of the local states, and the configuration of international interest. Palestine may have just as well-funded women’s NGOs as Egypt, again as part of the “peace dividend,” but the nature of the work they do, the social networks they forge or on which they are built, their relationship to international and national institutions and projects, and even the class relations and solidarities—many political—among the women and their beneficiaries, differ dramatically from the Egyptian case.

Finally, in a somewhat unusual move, this paper tracked “Muslim women’s rights” out of the arenas where it is mobilized explicitly and in turn configures the social field, into one village. This is a village that houses the kinds of socially marginal women often imagined to be the “grassroots” beneficiaries of rights work: the “traditional” or “oppressed” women in need of rights and empowerment. The women in this village that I have come to know over the past eighteen years are not members of any women’s rights organizations or recipients of their funds; they have not been the object of “rights” interventions in the current era except through a short-lived government literacy program for women in the 1990s and equally short-lived initiatives for handicraft production by individual Europeans. What the fragments of conversation I had with them on the subject of “rights” demonstrate, however, is that no one is unaffected by the circulation of discourses of “Muslim women’s rights” and the practical ways their pursuit is being negotiated. At the same time,

these fragments indicate that the framework and the projects of “Muslim women’s rights” do not begin to exhaust these women’s conceptions of rights and their experiences of trying to assert them in everyday life. Only ethnography can reveal the different place of “rights” in these lives, and the multiple registers and tracks they follow in specific locations. When we treat “Muslim women’s rights” as a social fact rather than a rallying cry, we can begin to use them to better understand the complex dynamics of gendered power, global, national, and local.

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NOTES

1. For perceptive analyses of the popular literature on the oppressed Muslim woman, see Bahramitash 2005; Lalami 2006; and Ahmad 2009.

2. For another ethnographic approach to rights, see Slyomovics 2005.

3. It goes without saying that I use the term "Muslim women's rights" here not because I believe there is something that unites all Muslim women or makes their lives and access to rights unique, but because the notion that there is such a thing and the work and debates framed in terms of this concept are becoming common sense. And though my examples are drawn from the Arab world, because that is where I have done my research, I am keenly aware of how this skewing perpetuates the association of Islam with the Arab world when in fact Muslims are found around the world. For a good critical analysis of the Muslim woman idea, which she cleverly calls the "Muslimwoman," see cooke 2007. For counterweights to the focus on the Arab world, see the special issue of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (2008 [10:4]) edited by Elora Chowdhury, Leila Farsakh, and Rajini Srikanth.

4. My research assistant found these sources and printed them out but I have not been able to access the website. At the time it was <http://www1.aucegypt.edu/src/wsite1/PROJECT>. The Social Research Center's current site is <http://www1.aucegypt.edu/src/>.

5. Al-Ali's ethnographic study (2000) of NGOs active in the 1990s focused on secular women's groups ranging from those affiliated with political parties to those working independently on advocacy, research, or service provision, whether left or liberal; other scholars such as Karam (1998), Abdelrahman (2004), and Elyachar (2007) have sampled a broader range.

6. Nationalist campaigns to discredit the smaller NGOs for their foreign links must be seen, as Sakr argues, as "a diversionary tactic." Given that Egypt is the second largest recipient of US aid, Sakr concludes that it "seems perverse to suggest that NGOs were more to blame than the government for prolonging dependency on foreign powers" (Sakr 2004, 172). For more on "NGOs, INGOs, GO-NGOs and DO-NGOs," see Carapico 2000.

7. See critiques of the *AHDR 2005* by Abu-Lughod 2009b, Adely 2009, and Hasso 2009.

8. Similarly, the annual report on the European Neighbourhood Policy by the Commission of the European Communities notes that 17 million euros were earmarked in 2008 for human rights, women's rights, and children's rights projects in Egypt (CEC 2009, 22).

9. This strategy of setting up a government body to advance rights that were formerly the bailiwick of more critical NGOs, while trying to discredit them by presenting them as part of a foreign plot, was copied, it seems, in the case of human rights. Three years after the creation of the NCW, a National Council for Human Rights was established. As Maha Abdelrahman has argued, with serious restrictions on NGOs and a campaign to misrepresent "human rights and the organisations that attempt to promote these rights as mouthpieces of Western imperialist powers," the regime tarred human rights organizations as a threat to Egypt's national security and reputation. Meanwhile, the regime "has gained a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the public by representing itself as the protector of national interests. More recently... since the debate on and the foundation of the National Council for Human Rights in 2003, the state has refined its discourse on the role of civil society

and human rights organisations by promoting an image of itself as the true patron of civil society organisations and the 'official agent' of a more nationalistically defined human rights movement" (Abdelrahman 2007, 287).

10. <http://www.adew.org/en/?action=10000&sub=1> (accessed September 20, 2009).

11. As part of a required course called Workshop in Development Practice, some masters students were invited to review ADEW's programs and make recommendations.

12. If the women activists of the 1990s shared a middle- or upper-class status, as they still seem to do if the women in the NGOs studied by 'Abd al-Salam (2005) are an indication and as Abdelrahman (2004) confirms more broadly for NGOs, whether Islamic, Coptic, community development, or advocacy oriented, women active in the women's rights and women's development NGOs share a basically secular stance while differing on many issues, priorities, and responses to the Islamic revival (al-Ali 2000, 11–12).

13. A Cairo activist interviewed by the author, March 2008.

14. CEWLA is sought after as a partner by many, including the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, as when it had a multiyear project on honor crimes. CEWLA commissioned its own study.

15. http://www.oxfamnovib.nl/id.html?lang=EN&id=PROJ_DETAIL&pid=EGY-501378-0005583 (accessed September 26, 2009). On the SOAS website for honor crimes (see n. 14 above), CEWLA is described as operating to "raise awareness of law and of human rights principles among grassroots communities, legal bodies and NGOs. CEWLA campaigns for equality of women, with an emphasis on legal equity and the amendment of discriminatory laws" (<http://www.soas.ac.uk/honourcrimes/PartnerProjectsFull.htm>; accessed September 26, 2009).

16. Egypt ratified CEDAW in 1981.

17. The director of CEWLA, Azza Suleiman, is also part of a transnational network of Muslim feminists who in February 2009 in Kuala Lumpur launched an organization called Musawah (<http://www.musawah.org/about.asp>), dedicated to seeking justice and equality within Islamic family law. Suleiman is on the board of Musawah. For more on the organization, see Abu-Lughod 2009a.

18. For more on the alliance of the state and al-Azhar in Egypt, see Zeghal 1999 and Moustafa 2000.

19. When Bibars had suddenly put herself forward as a candidate for parliamentary elections in 2007, people were suspicious about where she had gotten the money for this. At the time, she made the news for contesting the election results, accusing the police and officials of rigging the votes in her district of Manial where she got 2,995 votes and the other two opposition candidates got 199 and 51 votes respectively, while the winner, the National Democratic Party candidate (Bibars is a member of the NDP but ran as an independent) got 14,146 votes. Election monitors said that no more than 4,000 had ever voted in the district and there were reports of vote-buying and police intimidation (el-Din 2008). For a profile see Moll 2004.

20. Bibars was interviewed on Al-Jazeera by Riz Khan on September 22, 2008. See <http://www.ashoka.org/video/5007> (accessed September 20, 2009).

21. <http://www.ashoka.org/support> (accessed September 20, 2009).
22. The Ashoka Middle East/North Africa fellows program, like ADEW (perhaps because both are directed by Bibars), has also taken advantage of the opportunity to partner with Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. Students in the development program in 2008–09 were commissioned to evaluate a girls' sports program in Upper Egypt sponsored by Nike and run by an Ashoka Fellow.
23. <http://stopsexualharassment.net/about> (accessed September 26, 2009).
24. <http://www.netsquared.org/projects/harassmap-reporting-mapping-sexual-harassment-sms> (accessed September 26, 2009).
25. <http://www.oneinthreewomen.com> (accessed September 21, 2009).
26. <http://www.iamapeacekeeper.com/womenshealthadvocacy.htm> (accessed September 21, 2009).
27. <http://stop-stoning.org> (accessed September 20, 2009).
28. See Moghadam (2005, 142–72) for an excellent description of WLUMI's positions and history.
29. The literature on saving Muslim women is now huge. Some places to start are Abu-Lughod 2002; Grewal 2005; Razack 2007; Mahmood 2008. For analyses of the significance of Hirsi Ali and the film, *Submission*, from the perspective of Dutch scholars, see Moors 2005 and de Leeuw and van Wichelen 2005. The website for the Jordanian campaign against honor killings is <http://nohonor.org/> (accessed September 20, 2009); the issues are analyzed more fully in Abu-Lughod n.d.
30. See <http://codepink4peace.org/blog/2009/09/gaza-digest/> (accessed September 21, 2009).
31. New evidence of this has emerged in the report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict (the "Goldstone Report"), submitted in September 2009 (see UN/HRC 2009).
32. *Women, Armed Conflict and Loss*, ed. Khawla Abu-Baker (2004), was published through the Women's Studies Centre in Jerusalem with Swedish funding (Kvinna Till Kvinna [Woman to Woman] and Sida [Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency]).
33. For a subtle analysis of the impact of human rights on Palestinian politics, representations, and subjectivity, see Allen 2009.
34. *Palestinian Women: A Status Report* (BZU/WSP 1997) includes chapters on "Palestinian Society" by Lisa Taraki, "Social Support" by Penny Johnson, "Population and Fertility" by Rita Giacaman, and "Labor and Economy" by Rema Hammami.
35. See Abu-Lughod 2009b, Adely 2009, and Hasso 2009.
36. See Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005a; 2005b; 2009; and a video of her presentation on the Gruber Foundation website: http://www.gruberprizes.org/Gruber-Prizes/WomensRights_Laureates_Webcast.php?awardid=47 (accessed September 21, 2009).
37. See <http://globalrightsmaghreb.wordpress.com/> (accessed September 21, 2009).
38. The *mahr* is a monetary amount that is a gift to the bride and is payable

in full in the case of divorce.

39. As Singerman (2005) has noted, the coalition that initiated this model contract project ended up moving on to a different strategy and a wider set of allies, in the end succeeding in getting through Parliament in 2000 changes to the procedures of Personal Status Law that would facilitate women's rights to divorce, but not pursuing the idea of the model marriage contract.

40. I acknowledge the dangers of picking out individual cases; I do so here neither to present such women as victims in order to solicit aid or justify good works nor to cast them as unsung heroines resisting patriarchy in far-flung places, as critics charge is commonly the case in NGO work or feminist ethnography (Lazreg 2002; Sangtin Writers 2006). However, I am using their voices to speak to an audience of my peers concerned with "Muslim women's rights" and so am contributing to inserting these village women into the discourses and practices that constitute them as subjects of "women's rights."

41. For more on women and education, see Adely 2009; for more on education in the village, see Abu-Lughod 2005.

42. She explained to me this element of Islamic law: the man takes two portions and the woman takes one.

43. This is confirmed by Rachida Chih's study of Sufis of the Khalwatiyya Brotherhood in Upper Egypt. Based on research in the 1990s, she argues, "Women, like men, want to meet the shaykh for his baraka, for spiritual counseling but also for his mediation and protection against a ruthless husband or to escape a forced marriage.... The shaykh's mediation is so popular that the population of the village has called it *hukm hasani* meaning for them a fair and quick justice that compensates the victims and prevents vendettas..." (Chih 2004, 162).

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